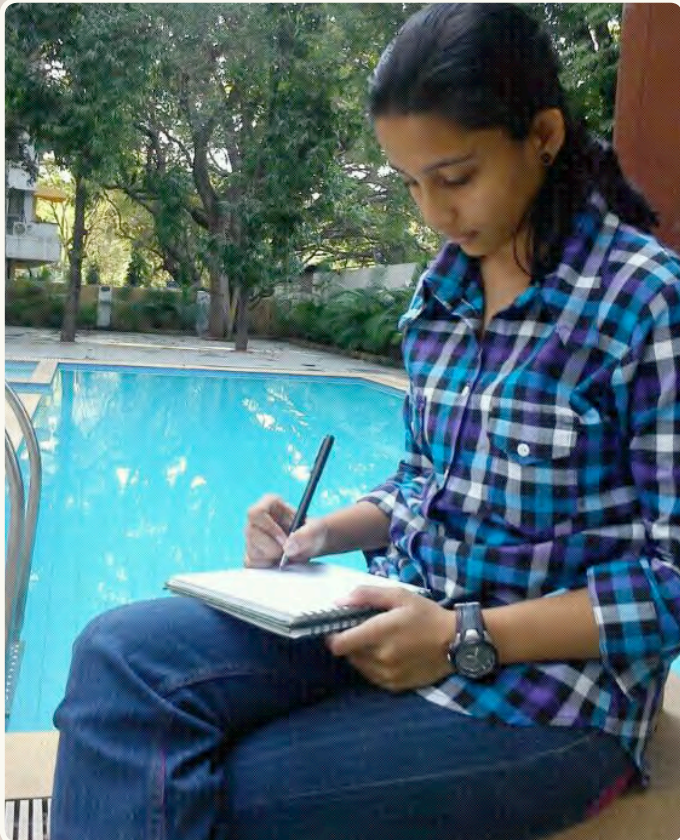


FOURTEEN, AND FEMINIST

by MANASI NENE



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Manasi Nene is a 16-year old feminist from Pune, India, hoping to become a journalist one day. When she's not reading or writing, she is making music, correcting her friends' grammar and finding new methods to put off her studies.

Manasi has initiated a project to collect stories, from young women all over the world, about how they first switched on to feminism. *YourFeministStory* is a blog, still in its early stages, but hoping to grow into something big. The world doesn't need more feminist pages but it certainly needs more feminists.

Teachers, here's an idea to share with your students. Visit <http://yourfeministstory.blogspot.com.au> and email stories to yourfeministstory@gmail.com.

Like

It was just another day. I was waiting for my school bus, dreading its arrival because I had a test in three hours. Sigh, the sad life of a 9th grader. I envied the 5th grader waiting with me—she lived in my building, we went to the same school, on the same bus, but her life seemed so much nicer, minus the burden of studies. Her father used to wait with her, and I didn't think much of it. Unfortunately, trouble only starts when you least expect it.

At 14, you're old enough to understand everything that's wrong with society in theory, but too young to try to change anything, or appreciate the work being done to change these things, or know what to do in case you're confronted with a situation like this. So when this man started staring at me every day—staring intensely, while waiting for the bus to arrive—I wasn't even sure if something was wrong or not. I knew it wasn't normal for anybody to stare at anyone like that, but I couldn't exactly do anything about it.

And it went on. I'd bury my nose in my books to distract myself, but every time I looked up, every time I looked in that direction from the corner of my eye, he was staring. His daughter would be off somewhere smelling flowers or petting dogs, and he'd sit staring. It went on for months. The worst part was, I didn't even know what was going on, so I couldn't even tell anybody. How do you tell anybody—parents, teachers, friends—about something like this? They'd just say that I'm over reacting, or he's really not staring, or that he won't do anything.

“ So I decided, I wouldn’t let it get to me. Nobody died of staring, or being stared at. ”

All that might have been true. But they weren’t the ones getting stared at every day.

They didn’t know what it was like. Maybe it is an over-reaction, but nobody wants to be quantified like that. Even when they’re too young even to understand how they’re being quantified in the eyes of such men. It was as if he had the upper hand in a game I didn’t even know I was playing. I knew it wasn’t usual behaviour, I knew it wouldn’t have happened if I were a boy. But there wasn’t anything I could do. There was nobody I could tell, because there was nothing to tell.

I thought I’d just deal with it, for the year and a half I had left of school (in India, formal ‘school’ stops at 10th grade, and you move on to Junior College for 11th and 12th). It’s no physical harm, and it would be mental harm only if I let it get to me. So I decided, I wouldn’t let it get to me. Nobody died of staring, or being stared at.

But that would have been valid if it had stopped at the staring. It hadn’t stopped at staring. It went on to a *Facebook* friend request, which I promptly ignored. I didn’t want to be associated with creeps like this. He sent another friend request, so I went snooping around his account, just because of that curiosity that 14-year olds tend to possess. Turns out, he was married but “Interested in Dating”. And the bit that really got to me was, he had posted the URL of my account on his wall, and he ‘liked’ his own post. I really didn’t get the logic behind this, but logic wasn’t ever a prerequisite for freaking someone out. I knew that I had nothing to be scared about, I knew that he wasn’t actually hurting me, and I still didn’t tell anyone. It was as if I was ashamed of it.

Every day at the place-where-the-bus-stopped (not a bus stop, because there were only the two of us getting on), I started focussing on my books diligently, as an excuse to avoid looking at or talking to him. Because if a man like this tried to start small-talk every day, you wouldn’t be too enthusiastic in your response either. Here’s how it would go:

Him: What do you want to do after 12th?

Me: English Literature most probably, but I haven’t made up my mind.

Him: Literature? So stupid that is. I suppose you’ll just get a husband and spend your days in the kitchen after that.

Me: It’s my life, I’ll see what to do.
(I wasn’t bold enough to be properly rude to him and give him a proper retaliation. I wish I had been.)

Him: Become an engineer or lawyer or something.

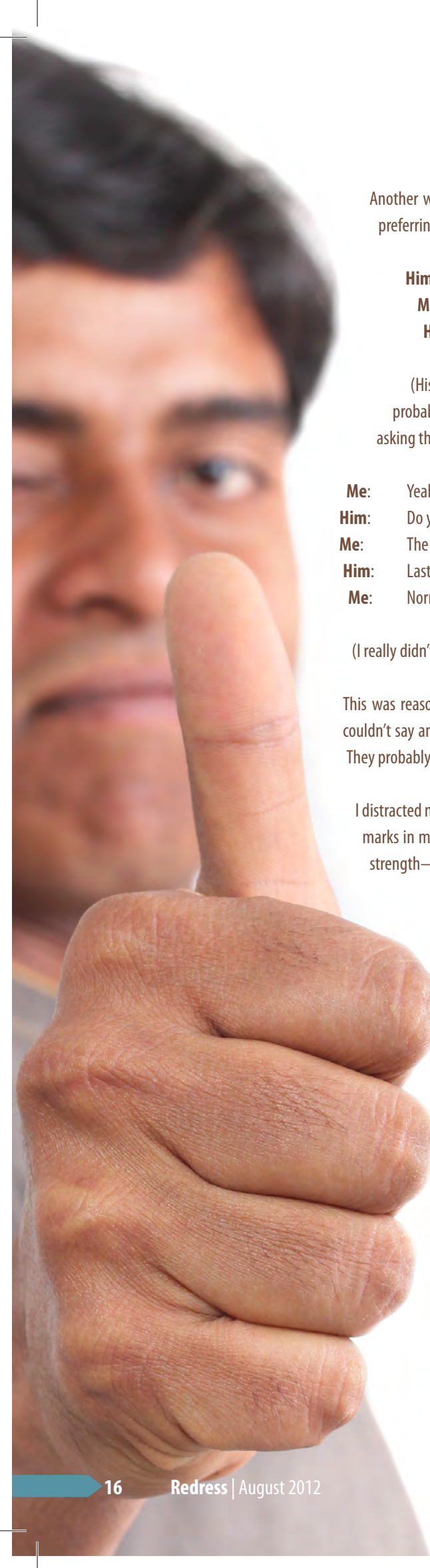
Me: I have a big test today. Sorry I can’t talk. I need to study.

This went on for quite some time. Not only was he still perpetually staring, he was narrow minded about career options in the typical Indian way. And that was another thing which annoyed me—why the hell did he have a say in my future? Yet, I spent the next few days debating my choice of Literature and then Journalism. I would have to face nay-sayers my whole life, might as well take a job with relatively few nay-sayers and avoid the trouble. With small gestures like that, he was playing havoc with my psyche.

And yet, he wasn’t doing anything wrong. I couldn’t tell my parents, they’d just interpret it their way and say he was trying to be social. I knew that girls my age often went through so much more than I was, and I had absolutely no right to complain. So I let it go on like this.

It was winter by now, and waiting for the bus at seven in the bitterly cold morning wasn’t a bundle of joy. I was sitting on the bench, when he drove up in his car, with his daughter. “Want a ride?” he asked. Since his daughter was with him, I knew that it would’ve been fine. But still, the thought just creeped me out. “No thanks,” I said immediately. “Sure?” he asked, “come inside and sit, no?”

Like I was going to do that. Not in a million years. “No, I’m fine here,” I said, and turned a deaf ear to him. To some, it might still seem as an attempt to be social. Even to you, reader, you might be sceptical as to why I was feeling so creeped out. But you know, in your heart, when someone crosses a line being social and being perverted. On the surface it seemed perfectly normal but I knew that it was far from that.



Another week went. His daughter and he would sit in the car, while I would sit on the bench, freezing but preferring that fate to sitting in his car. One day, however, this happened:

Him: Do you wear shorts?

Me: What?!

Him: Do you wear shorts. To school?

(His daughter's uniform was different to mine, which was a tunic, blouse, tie and a pair of shorts. He was probably just inquiring because his daughter would have a change of uniform next year. Didn't justify him asking that way, though.)

Me: Yeah, it's in the uniform.

Him: Do you buy from outside? Or does the school give?

Me: The school gives. Can I go back to studying now?

Him: Last question, how short are they?

Me: Normal, I guess...

(I really didn't know how to answer that. I wish I had it in me to be rude.)

This was reason enough to tell people. My friends couldn't give me any advice except to sit away, my teachers couldn't say anything except to ignore him and focus on my studies, my parents still thought he was being social. They probably didn't want a confrontation. Nobody did, not even me. But I had to make it stop, somehow.

I distracted myself the best I could, when I wasn't studying (you'd think, after all that studying, that I'd get the best marks in my class. I didn't). I turned to books. I turned to all the powerful women I knew, I turned to them for strength—just to finish this ordeal without feeling victimised, if not for a confrontation.

Hermione Granger, she'd stand up to this. She was bullied for so long, but still found ways to be strong (and keep her grades up). Ginny Weasley, she was a rebel, especially when Harry wasn't around. Cersei Lannister, she's a strong and independent woman (although a villain). Daenerys Targaryen, she's taking over the world and she's not even 16. Eowyn, she killed a creature that famously proclaimed "No living man can kill me".
(Those are all fictional characters.)

There are so many women in this world—bold, strong, independent, ready to fight for what they believe. Able to make it out of the harshest of circumstances. Indira Gandhi, Kiran Bedi, Aung San Suu Kyi, Rosa Parks ...the list can go on and on. Today's women, they aren't the sort that can be cowed down. And that gave me courage.

I knew, that just a man staring at me wasn't really a big deal, I wasn't actually standing up against anything. But just one thought—if I had been a boy, this wouldn't have happened—kept resonating through my mind. I vowed, I'm going to be a strong woman. Independent, and I'm not going to let creeps like this get in my way. It's my life, and I'll be damned if I let this man mess up my thinking. Tough women inspire other women to be tough—and that was what opened my eyes to feminism.